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# Introduction: Reshaping Campus Communication and Community through Social Network Sites

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In the last few years, social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace have become standard fixtures on college campuses throughout the United States, and they now constitute an integral part of the daily communication practices for many students. For those of us involved in higher education, it is particularly important to understand SNS practices, outcomes, and motivations for use because these sites are fundamentally changing the social fabric of the university and thus a wide range of campus activities.

On a purely social level, they offer students vast amounts of information about one another—information that provides the impetus for social interactions that might not otherwise occur. When used as an organizing tool, they provide new ways for student groups to reach out to members, share information, learn about campus events, and mobilize support and action. Finally, although many instructors see SNSs as a distraction in classrooms with Internet access, their use is indirectly affecting teaching and learning practices as students use them to arrange study groups, talk about course work, and connect with classmates. In short, for many students, SNSs figure prominently in shaping their campus experience from the moment

they check out their future roommate on Facebook to the day they join their school's "alum" network.

Of course, SNS use is growing among other segments of society. Elsewhere, my colleagues and I have argued that SNSs are affecting greater society in important ways.<sup>1</sup> First, SNSs enable users to manage large extended networks more effectively, including people we otherwise wouldn't track, thus increasing our ability to access resources embedded in social relationships. Second, SNSs give us information about people we may meet in various casual encounters throughout our daily activities. This information can serve as a social lubricant, enabling new kinds of interactions that may have positive outcomes for individuals and communities. Third, these sites give individuals new ways of connecting with one another over shared interests, problems, or experiences and then to mobilize coordinated displays of support or action.

We see similar patterns of use unfolding on campuses across the United States. Due to their particular stage of psychological development and because they are such avid users of these sites, undergraduate students as a group are an especially fascinating focus for SNS researchers. For those of us who work with students inside and outside the classroom, attempting

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to describe, measure, and understand changes introduced by SNS use on campus is even more compelling.

SNSs create new opportunities for educational institutions as well as new challenges. Universities must consider policy decisions that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago. For instance, should students who find something troubling in an SNS profile be allowed to change their assigned roommate before meeting him or her face-to-face? Should these technologies be incorporated into the classroom, and if so, how? What about student-instructor “friending”? Will students expect special treatment from professors who accept their friend requests? How should universities react to problematic SNS content: by imposing penalties, offering educational programs, or turning a blind eye? These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions now facing institutions of higher learning in relation to SNSs.

## Definitional Issues

In an overview of social network sites we wrote for the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, danah boyd and I defined SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”<sup>2</sup> As the above suggests, SNSs constitute a new medium that incorporates many aspects of earlier online modes of communication, such as personal web pages and messaging systems, but with new features that build upon the *social network* that is at the heart of these systems.

The SNS profile itself can resemble a personal web page (although the format is more constrained), with photographs and self-descriptive text. What differentiates SNSs from other, earlier forms of online self-representation is the articulated social

network these sites enable and the ways in which they help users manage what can quickly become a large extended network of contacts. The social network is created when users of Facebook, MySpace, or other SNSs link to the profiles of others on the system (or, in the vernacular of many of the sites, they “friend” other users). Features such as Facebook’s News Feed or MySpace’s Friend Updates allow users to monitor all of their friends’ recent online activity on one page.

Depending on the site and the customized add-ons users choose to install, these sites provide users with a vast array of possibilities for creating content and connecting with one another. Users can share photos, music, blog posts, and videos with one another and can comment on content posted by their peers. They can join groups; affiliate with brands, organizations, or political causes; or search for others with shared interests. These sites host a variety of communication tools: synchronous and asynchronous, one to one and one to many, massively public and intimately private, ranging from the mundane to the perplexing (as with one third-party Facebook application that allows users to throw virtual sheep at each other).

## History and Usage

SNSs have been around for more than a decade: The first SNS, sixdegrees.com, launched in 1997. The last few years have seen an increase in the introduction of new services, including the creation of LiveJournal and BlackPlanet (both 1999), Cyworld (2001), Friendster (2002), LinkedIn (2003), and YouTube (2005). SNS use has now become a mainstream online activity, most visibly for younger users. The Pew Internet & American Life Project, for instance, recently found that 55% of the teens (aged 12–17) surveyed had a profile on an SNS such as Facebook or MySpace.<sup>3</sup> Publications from 2007 estimated that users spent about 20 minutes a day on

Facebook<sup>4</sup> and on other SNSs.<sup>5</sup> However, this number has no doubt increased in the last year as these sites add new communication features such as instant messaging (IM), which encourages users to keep the program open in a window throughout the day. College students are particularly avid users. Estimate ranges depend on the particular campus, but it is clear that SNS activity is the norm rather than the exception. A full 85.2% of the students participating in the ECAR study reported joining at least one SNS; among Eszter Hargittai's survey of the University of Illinois at Chicago first-year students, 88% were SNS users.<sup>6</sup>

There are hundreds of SNSs around the globe, such as Orkut in Brazil, Cyworld in Korea, and Bebo in the United Kingdom. Two of the sites that dominate this space, especially among U.S. undergraduates, are MySpace and Facebook.

MySpace was started in 2003 and was embraced by bands seeking publicity and the ability to reach new and existing fans. Attracted by the possibility of connecting with bands and one another, teens soon gravitated to the site and began creating profiles that became increasingly elaborate as users learned to alter the profiles' look and feel through code they copied and pasted from other websites. MySpace was purchased by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. in mid-2005 for \$580 million, a sum that *Fortune* later claimed was low.<sup>7</sup> Currently, MySpace has an estimated 110 million monthly active users, making it by far the largest SNS in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

As suggested by the ECAR findings, Facebook is especially popular among college-aged students. Facebook was started in 2004 by a Harvard undergraduate, Mark Zuckerberg. It was originally limited to university students but then opened up to high school students and businesses and is now available to anyone. (Currently, Facebook claims that more than half of its user base is not associated with a

college.) Facebook shares the general SNS characteristics of MySpace but offers less ability to personalize the appearance of one's profile. Thus, the pages appear more uniform, which can be less daunting to older users and advertisers. Facebook also recently opened up its application programming interface (API), enabling hundreds of developers to create applications that extend Facebook's functionality. Currently, Facebook receives between 22 and 25 million visitors each month.<sup>9</sup>

MySpace and Facebook are two of the most popular sites on college campuses, but research suggests that there are systematic differences among users that affect which site (if any) they choose to use. Hargittai's work suggests that demographic variables play a role in predicting whether students use Facebook, MySpace, or another site.<sup>10</sup> She finds that women are more likely than men to use MySpace; that students of Hispanic origin are more likely to use MySpace, whereas white/Caucasian students are more likely to use Facebook; and that students whose parents have less than a high school degree are more likely to be MySpace users, whereas students whose parents have a college degree are more likely to be members of Facebook.

## Facebook and Social Relationships on Campus

It is clear that students have embraced the social and technical affordances provided by these sites, but until recently there was little empirical research that examined outcomes from and motivations for SNS use. Although it has shifted a bit in the last year or so, for a long time media coverage of SNSs on campus focused on negative outcomes, such as privacy concerns or poor self-presentational choices that diminished students' attractiveness to employers or got them in trouble with campus officials and law enforcement. Typical popular-press titles include "Alarms Sound over Athletes' Facebook Time"<sup>11</sup> or "Cop Snares College Pals in Own Web."<sup>12</sup>

A few years ago, my Michigan State University (MSU) colleagues Charles Steinfield and Cliff Lampe and I noticed a discrepancy between the high usage we saw among undergraduates at our institution and the negative outcomes prevalent in the popular narratives that circulated about Facebook and other SNSs. We began a program of research focusing on Facebook use and social capital to understand more about the motivations for student use of Facebook and to describe the benefits, if any, they might be receiving from such use. Although our research has focused on Facebook use among undergraduates, many of these trends can be seen in other SNSs and populations.

### **Benefits of Facebook “Friends”: Research on Facebook Use and Social Capital**

Our research uses social capital as our theoretical lens, which gives us a grammar for describing the kinds of benefits we suspected students might be experiencing from their use of Facebook. *Social capital* refers to the benefits we receive from our relationships with others. In his well-known book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam examines patterns of social capital in the United States and describes some of the reasons why this valuable resource might be declining.<sup>13</sup> Putnam discusses two kinds of social capital. We typically get *bonding social capital* from our close friends and family; this comes in the form of emotional support and tangible resources. If we need a shoulder to cry on or money to cover this month’s rent, these are the people we turn to. *Bridging social capital*, however, is important as well. Bridging social capital is associated with our “weak ties”—people we are not particularly close to, such as friends of friends. These people aren’t likely to loan us money, but they are more likely to provide us with access to diverse perspectives and new information. Also, because we

interact with close friends more frequently, we tend to know what they know. This isn’t the case with weak ties, and in fact research has shown that we are more likely to receive information about an employment opportunity from someone we see rarely, a pattern sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) describes as the “strength of weak ties.”<sup>14</sup>

The notion that SNS use might be associated with larger networks of weak ties and thus higher levels of bridging social capital was something we suspected when we developed our Facebook study. For the past three years, we have surveyed MSU undergraduates about their use of Facebook and other variables such as social capital. Our first survey, fielded in April 2006, revealed that intensive use of Facebook was associated with higher levels of all three kinds of social capital we examined: bridging (the benefits associated with weak ties, such as new information and diverse perspectives), bonding (emotional and tangible support garnered from close friends and family), and *maintained social capital* (a concept we developed to describe the ability to mobilize resources from a previously inhabited network, such as one’s high school). Intensive use of Facebook was a significant predictor of bridging social capital. Interestingly, general Internet use was not, suggesting that only certain kinds of Internet activities are related to the creation and maintenance of bridging social capital. We also found similar patterns for bonding and maintained social capital, although the effects were not as strong.

However, our cross-sectional survey data didn’t allow us to determine the causal direction of our findings. Our results could indicate that heavy users of Facebook gain social capital through their use, but it may also be that individuals who start out with higher levels of social capital tend to use Facebook more. For insight into this and other questions, we approached our respondents one year later and invited them to take the survey again. When we examined the responses of

only those who took the survey both years, we were able to argue more conclusively that Facebook use precedes gains in bridging social capital. The relationship between Facebook use at the first survey and social capital at the second survey was much higher than the correlation between social capital at the first survey and Facebook use at the second survey.<sup>15</sup>

Critical-thinking skills and expertise in one's field of study are essential objectives of the college experience. But higher education should also develop other relevant skills, such as learning how to initiate and maintain different kinds of social relationships and successfully manage one's online self-presentation. And community building, after all, is one of higher education's key concerns. SNSs can be a significant tool in assisting students as they learn these kinds of skills, which will be increasingly important for them as they develop into successful citizens, community members, and professionals.

## **Social Aspects of SNS Use**

Although more work is needed to fully understand the mechanism behind our social capital findings, we can speculate on the basis of what we know about the technical characteristics of these sites and how they tend to be used. Facebook, for instance, has a number of features that support keeping in touch with one's network of weak and strong ties. First, individuals have the ability to include vast amounts of information in their profile, ranging from musical preferences to an open-ended "About me" section. If they wish, they can populate a number of contact information fields, such as instant messaging screen name, phone number, and address. (In our most recent study, about a quarter of respondents listed their cell phone number on their profile, and more than two-thirds listed their instant messaging screen name.) One's privacy settings determine who can view this information. Inclusion of contact information

assists users in staying in touch, and our interview data suggest that some undergraduate students use Facebook as a makeshift contact list or address book. As one student told us, "Honestly, I can't remember what I did before Facebook. It sounds really pathetic, but it's just so easy to access information about people. It's not bad information, it's just instead of 'Do you have this person's phone number?' or 'Oh God, where do they live, they live in this dorm but I need the room number,' it's just so easy to just go on there and find it."<sup>16</sup>

Second, the site itself offers a variety of tools that enable communication among users, useful when contact information isn't available or a phone call would be awkward. These include public postings (the "Wall"); a web-based messaging system; a lightweight, content-free digital nudge known as a "poke"; and, most recently, instant messaging. In my own use of the site, I appreciate the fact that it enables me to keep in touch with people whom I wouldn't normally track in my own address book, such as old high school acquaintances I will probably never see face-to-face (save for a once-a-decade reunion). Now, students at a party can ask those they meet to "Facebook me!" with the knowledge that this fleeting connection can be digitally revitalized at any time should the need or desire arise. Other sites have similar features that can help individuals, once they have made a connection, keep in touch with one another. For instance, Cyworld users can visit one another's "minihomes" and leave notes in their guest book; MySpace allows users to send messages to one another, instant message others, or leave public comments for one another.

Third, many SNSs enable users to get updates about friends when these individuals have engaged in public activity on the site, such as making changes to their profile or commenting about a photograph. In Facebook, this is known as the News Feed. Although it was the subject of user concern

when it was first introduced (individuals who weren't comfortable with early implementations of the feature claimed it felt like stalking), users now seem to appreciate the ease with which it enables them to keep up to date on their friends' activities on the site. Although some of this information is likely to be shared in phone, IM, or face-to-face conversations with close friends, being able to monitor the activities of weak ties enables these relationships to be maintained more easily.

Recently I updated my status in Facebook to announce I was celebrating my 10-year wedding anniversary. Among the congratulatory messages I received were two from my extended network of weak ties—one from a childhood friend whom I hadn't seen in 25 years, and the other from an SNS researcher from Finland whom I met once at a conference. I enjoyed hearing from both of these people and without the use of an SNS would be unlikely to maintain contact with either of them. Of course, I enjoy seeing updates about these people as well and appreciate the ability to engage in lightweight social surveillance of their lives. Knowing what is going on in their lives—whether it's a major milestone or a quotidian occurrence—makes future interactions more comfortable. Moments that might otherwise be awkward, such as seeing a vague acquaintance after a few months, are smoothed by these ready-made topics of conversation. Having a base level of information about others can help avoid awkward inquiries; anyone who has ever inadvertently asked about someone who has passed away or a relationship gone sour can understand the value of these tidbits of information in smoothing social interaction.

A valid question for many is, "What is the point of keeping in touch with people you wouldn't otherwise talk to?" The concept of social capital allows us to articulate why these large networks of weak ties are important to us both as individuals and as a society. From a bridging social capital perspective, the

benefits of keeping in touch with our weak ties are practical: new information, ideas, and opportunities. These might not be connections that are engaged often, but they can be harnessed when and if the need arises. For instance, one of our interview respondents described the way that she envisioned her high school friends would continue to use Facebook to keep in touch, and that even at their 40th reunion they wouldn't hesitate to ask favors from one another.

The benefits of these SNS-enabled weak ties can also be psychological: Many of us enjoy reading a quick note of congratulation or a happy birthday wish, even if it's from someone we don't know that well. In fact, our research shows that the influence of Facebook use on bridging social capital is particularly strong for those with low self-esteem.<sup>17</sup>

As described above, bridging social capital is associated with exposure to new ideas and perspectives. This kind of social capital may be particularly important during the undergraduate years because the period between the ages of 18 and 25, which has been called "emerging adulthood" by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett,<sup>18</sup> is important for psychosocial development. During this time, individuals are relatively free from the social expectations they experienced as teenagers or will experience as adults, and they can explore different orientations toward work, interpersonal relationships, and the world in general. Encountering new ideas, engaging in new experiences, and meeting diverse kinds of people are especially important during this time because they expose individuals to different life experiences and paths. Indeed, expanding one's horizon is one of the hallmarks of the higher education experience. SNSs may be particularly helpful in this regard because they allow us to maintain a larger network of weak ties through mechanisms such as rekindled relationships from the past or the ability to maintain a connection with individuals who otherwise would exist as ephemeral connections—people we meet once and then never see again.



## Friendship and SNSs

The ease with which SNSs allow individuals to connect with others and thus maintain these connections is a concern for some, who believe that this will somehow dilute the meaning of friendship. “How can someone have 500 friends?” is a common refrain asked by people who may not fully understand the meaning of “friends” in this context. Christine Rosen, for instance, writes in *The New Atlantis*: “Friendship on these sites focuses a great deal on collecting, managing, and ranking the people you know. Everything about MySpace, for example, is designed to encourage users to gather as many friends as possible, as though friendship were philately.”<sup>19</sup>

Although for some the metaphor of friends as postage stamps to be studied may be apt, many of the Facebook users we’ve surveyed are very savvy about the wide range of relationships that are articulated as “friends” in Facebook. Other research on the topic supports this notion as well; boyd lists the reasons why someone might accept a friend request, including impression management (having lots of friends makes you look popular), politeness norms, self-expression needs, and getting access to content otherwise protected by privacy settings.<sup>20</sup> Actual friendship is a reason, of course, but it is only one of many. I believe that the undergraduates who use Facebook are more aware of the ambiguities surrounding the “friends” label than we might think. In fact, in one of our studies we asked students to articulate how many of their Facebook friends were actual friends. It turned out to be about one-third, on average. In my assessment, Facebook doesn’t appear to be cheapening or threatening “real” friendships and in fact may be enabling its users to expand their social networks in positive ways.

## Online and Offline Patterns of Communication

Many of the early forms of computer-mediated communication brought strangers together to discuss, argue, and provide

support for one another. Indeed, the fact that the Internet allowed people to come together on the basis of interests, not accidents of geography, was celebrated: Think of Rheingold’s book *The Virtual Community* (although many of those participants were located in and around California’s Bay Area).<sup>21</sup> Online dating is a similar case, because participants are specifically seeking individuals outside their existing pool of contacts.

SNSs are different because these sites often support connections between people who share some sort of offline connection, such as living in the same dorm or working at the same institution. Research suggests that students are using Facebook to supplement, not replace, face-to-face communication. Scott Golder and his colleagues found that Facebook use decreases during times traditionally associated with face-to-face socializing for college students.<sup>22</sup> For instance, use of Facebook was higher during the week than on weekends and higher during breaks (such as the summer months and winter break) than during the school year.

## SNSs and Past, Present, and Future Relationships

One useful way of thinking about Facebook and relationships is to consider past, present, and future relationships. Although the bulk of my research examines Facebook specifically, these trends will hold true for other SNSs as well.

Regarding “past” relationships, one of the primary uses of Facebook is to maintain connections with people from previously shared geographical (or other) places. For college students, this can mean acquaintances from high school or from their hometown. As these sites are adopted by a broader cross section of the public, we can expect to see them used to keep track of former colleagues, neighbors, or extended family in other cities. As I discuss above, one may

have Facebook friends whom one never sees, but the lightweight connections enabled by these services are helpful.

SNSs can also be used to maintain current relationships, although this use might not be as valuable to users because close friends usually use a variety of communication media to keep in touch. Features such as birthday reminders and invitations to parties and other events can support existing relationships. Close friends may use Facebook to share or comment on one another's photos, allowing them to connect once in a face-to-face setting and again in a mediated context. In fact, Facebook is one of the most popular sites for sharing photos on the web.

The notion of SNSs supporting "future" relationships may be a bit misleading, but I believe the information available in SNSs can lower the barriers to initial communication and serve as a social lubricant, easing the way for relationships to form. Our research on Facebook suggests that typically individuals don't browse the profiles of total strangers (as happens in other online contexts such as online dating sites) or try to "friend" them; more likely, the individuals have some shared connection with another person and then use the site to find out more about them. This shared connection could be a shared class or dormitory, a brief encounter at a social event, or a mutual friend. Identity information from Facebook (such as musical tastes, friendship networks, or political orientation) can then be used to initiate a face-to-face conversation.

This theme emerged again and again when we spoke with MSU undergraduates about their Facebook use. For instance, one of the undergraduates we spoke with told us that Facebook "just makes it a little bit more intimate in your friendships with people. And gets more information out there that...someone would feel weird asking me, like, what I like to do." This individual (a male) explained that he enjoyed

shopping for shoes, and that having this information in his profile had resulted in several conversations that wouldn't have otherwise occurred.

## Self-Presentation and Privacy

Facebook and other SNSs let individuals construct an online representation of self, but users are sometimes unaware of their audience or experience problems due to the different groups that converge in online spaces such as Facebook. For students, this may include close friends, distant friends, family, professional contacts, and professors. Privacy concerns are frequently mentioned in conjunction with SNS use, especially for younger users who may not be aware of the true audience for their online self-disclosures. Early work on the subject pointed out that although students claimed to be concerned about privacy, they were likely to include personal information in their SNS profiles. In one of the first academic studies addressing this topic, Gross and Acquisti examined thousands of student Facebook profiles and described the potential privacy threats they discovered. For instance, they argued it was possible to reconstruct users' Social Security numbers using information commonly found in Facebook profiles, such as hometown and birthday.<sup>23</sup>

Norms have changed since this early research: Features such as Facebook's News Feed may have made individuals more aware of the true audience of their profile information, and recent surveys show that 66% of the online teens who have profiles limit access to their profile in some way; of those who don't, about half include some false information.<sup>24</sup> The ECAR data reveal similar trends.

## Educational Uses of SNSs

Like many communication and information technologies, SNSs are being assessed for their potential to support classroom instruction and other activities. Instructors are drawn to them



for many reasons, chief among them being the pedagogical possibilities inherent in the social processes they support (for instance, identity information that might humanize a large lecture class) and the practical fact that these technologies are already ingrained into the daily communication practices of their students. As an EDUCAUSE report on Facebook stated, "Any technology that is able to captivate so many students for so much time not only carries implications for how those students view the world but also offers an opportunity for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate those elements into teaching and learning."<sup>25</sup>

Among instructors, early adopters are using SNSs in the classroom in a wide range of ways. At one end of the spectrum, instructors are replacing more traditional media with SNSs as a way to broadcast course announcements, recognizing that Facebook messages are more likely to be seen by students who check Facebook on a daily basis but e-mail less frequently.<sup>26</sup> Others hope to energize course material by capitalizing on the fact that a new medium is often more engaging and interesting (at least initially) for students than one they've experienced hundreds of times and that the identity information found in SNSs can reinvigorate online and offline discussions. It may be that students appreciate the convenience of using an SNS to receive course-related announcements (as opposed to logging into a separate course management system such as Blackboard or ANGEL), but this is not where the true opportunities for higher education are found.

The real opportunities will be realized by instructors who infuse SNS practices into learning activities using sound pedagogical practices, drawing upon concepts such as digital literacy to articulate the instructional potential of these tools. Classes that take the technological, psychological, and sociological aspects of SNSs as a focus are natural

contexts for this approach. BJ Fogg at Stanford is an innovator in this regard. In fall 2007 he taught a class focusing on creating Facebook applications<sup>27</sup>; the following spring, he and his students examined Facebook from a psychological perspective. Reflecting upon the experience, he writes, "As a teacher and researcher, I find that dealing head-on with Facebook is the right approach. The students resonate with projects related to Facebook. They respond well to any assignments I give via a Facebook channel. And when they post work on Facebook, the students' friends outside the class often comment. So I'm seeing lots of benefits. On top of that, by using Facebook I've learned a lot about the challenges students face, what matters to them, and how my approach to teaching can benefit them most. Finally, Facebook matters because it's an indicator of what's coming next. The changes Facebook has made in the last 14 months have rippled through the technology industry. You can't understand what's going on today—or what's likely to happen—without understanding what makes Facebook tick."<sup>28</sup>

Not all instructors see the appeal of SNSs. Some are concerned about the increased (and, they believe, inappropriate) familiarity these sites may encourage between students and instructors; others view the sites as distractions from the real work of learning. Recent research by Haya Ajjan and Richard Hartshorne suggests that some instructors resist using Web 2.0 tools even though they recognize the benefits.<sup>29</sup>

We will likely see new technical and pedagogical innovations in the near future as private companies, institutions, and individual instructors engage with novel teaching methods and create new technical tools to support student learning using SNSs. Inigral, for instance, has recently introduced a new Facebook application called Schools, which is currently being tested at pilot institutions such as Abilene Christian University. While

acknowledging institutional needs for privacy and security, the tool integrates data from each school's registrar to show students their friends' course schedules and enables student-to-student communication. As founder Michael Staton explains, "Through testing an earlier version of our tool, Courses, we learned that students are not very interested in assignments and documents; they are much more interested in sharing and viewing information that helps them start or maintain a relationship with a classmate or friend, and a lot of that information is about school. We set aside our earlier project, Courses, and rebuilt it as Schools, which emphasizes features that support relationship-building and information-sharing in the academic context."<sup>30</sup>

Christine Greenhow is a researcher in learning technologies at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development who has been studying the use of SNSs in educational contexts and is currently conducting research to explore what connections might exist between SNS participation and learning for teenage students. She argues, "I think the message for educators, especially K-12 and college undergraduate instructors, is that it's more about teaching students how to use these tools to reinforce and develop the new learning competencies that are increasingly being called for. It's not so much about putting curriculum or links to assignments inside these spaces—I think that's a misuse and a misunderstanding of the opportunity these SNSs present—but knowing and supporting the 'informal learning' students are already doing in tandem with 'formal learning.'"<sup>31</sup>

The observation that students are using SNSs to support informal learning practices is supported by our survey data. Regardless of whether instructors are explicitly incorporating SNSs in their curricula, it is clear that students are integrating these tools into their educational experiences and that SNSs are influencing what happens in the class-

room in a variety of direct and indirect ways. In April 2008 we asked a random sample of MSU undergraduates about educational uses of Facebook—specifically, whether students had engaged in various behaviors in the six months prior to the survey. (Note that 96% of our respondents reported being a member of Facebook.) Although only 10% of the MSU respondents said they used Facebook as part of an assigned class exercise, about half had used Facebook to arrange a study group or meeting, more than half had used it to discuss classes or schoolwork, and about one-third reported using Facebook to "collaborate on an assignment in a way that your instructor would like." Most of our respondents (69%) had used Facebook to contact another student with a question related to class or schoolwork. The ECAR data presented in Chapter 6 of this study reflect a similar contrast between low use of SNSs for student communication with instructors and much higher usage for communication about class assignments between classmates. These social, informal, peer-to-peer discussions are important because this kind of on-demand, supportive interaction is now accepted as a valuable component of the learning process. The fact that they are happening on SNSs rather than on institutional CMSs suggests that SNSs may be challenging the careful plans of both CMS vendors and instructional technology administrators to provide "official" tools for student interaction and collaboration.

I believe that SNSs have real potential to be used to support teaching and learning practices, although their true utility will be for supporting informal, peer-to-peer exchanges and campus connections, as opposed to being utilized as a repository for documents or other traditional uses. The social affordances of SNSs, such as making identity information more salient during class discussions or supporting peer-to-peer connections, can

accommodate different learning styles inside and outside the classroom. SNS activity doesn't have to be limited to course-related activities. At a broad level these tools should be leveraged as environments in which students have the opportunity to practice managing their online self-presentation within the relatively safe confines of the university (as opposed to after graduation in the "real world"). Finally, and most important, SNS use has the potential to help students hone their digital literacy skills, which will be increasingly critical as they transition into successful digital citizens and professionals.

### **SNSs and Campus Life**

Students and faculty aren't the only ones using SNSs. Other groups on campus have also started to explore ways to incorporate SNSs into their activities. Some universities, such as the University of Miami, have started to purchase Facebook ads to promote intramural sports. Other institutions have explored using SNSs to recruit new students, to keep in touch with alumni, and to gain insight into campus trends. University libraries and librarians have been particularly engaged in finding new uses of SNSs. For instance, libraries can create groups that let them communicate with their patrons, and a few libraries have created Facebook applications that let users conduct literature searches from within the site.

Campus administrators would do well to explore how to harness the social connections that SNSs support. One study that examined Facebook use on campus found that student use of Facebook was positively correlated with feelings of connection to the campus,<sup>32</sup> and anecdotal evidence of this is easily found. For instance, in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shooting, students used Facebook to mourn, support one another, and share information. In short, the next few years promise to reveal more varied uses of SNSs on the campus as SNS companies continue to innovate and as users continue to adopt and adapt these services.

### **Areas of Concern**

Given these trends, many institutions are wondering how and whether to enact formal policies about SNS use on campus. Administrators, faculty, and staff within institutions of higher education need to consider a number of issues when pondering questions such as whether these tools should be used to submit graded assignments. First, the private companies that run many SNSs are not accountable to the university; they may change their terms of use and intellectual property and privacy policies at their discretion. Additionally, any instructor or institution that relies on a third-party site to host student material that will be graded needs to be aware that this content (or the site itself for that matter) could disappear at any time and may not be archived. Obviously, this is unlikely to happen with a popular service such as Blogger, Facebook, or MySpace, but it is something instructors should reflect on when assessing the trade-offs between in-house applications and third-party tools, which may be more technically sophisticated and more likely to be used by students after they graduate.

Additionally, there are ethical considerations that surround the formal use of SNSs within the classroom. For instance, is it appropriate to mandate that students become members of a commercial enterprise that seeks to monetize their attention through advertising revenues? In a related vein, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits the public release of certain kinds of information. A problematic scenario may arise if, for instance, a student's participation in a particular course-related group is mandatory and this membership information is available to the general public through the SNS.

Perhaps most important to consider is how students will view the incorporation of SNSs in their formal academic lives. Student resistance is a reason to tread cautiously in this arena. Students may associate SNSs

with a specific set of practices; for many, it is a playful environment separate from their academic pursuits. Reminding them about a final exam via Facebook may be the equivalent of showing up at a frat party on a Saturday night with some calculus problems to solve—and just as welcome.

Similarly, it is worth considering the relationship between instructors and their students and how this might be affected by the “friending” mechanism available on most SNSs. As a recent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* pointed out, “friending” between instructors and students is uncharted territory.<sup>33</sup> Even instructors who aren’t interested in exploring SNSs in the classroom are faced with decisions about their own SNS use. For instance, should instructors post public profiles on these sites? If so, what information is appropriate to include? Including one’s musical tastes is unlikely to invite controversy, but what about religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or political affiliation? Should students and instructors be Facebook friends? Will friended students expect preferential treatment, as some instructors fear? Is it ethical for instructors to use information they gather from SNSs when deciding whether to accept students’ excuses about missed exams or to grant paper extensions? Will students think a friend request from an instructor is creepy?

Norms regarding many of these issues are still in flux, although some have begun to calcify. Regarding student-instructor friending, many instructors allow students to initiate contact or friending, and some prefer to wait until the course is over to accept these requests. Early exploratory research on the issue reported some student resistance to faculty presence on Facebook but found that contact on Facebook did not affect student evaluations.<sup>34</sup> The same study found that about one-third of the students surveyed did not believe that faculty should be present on Facebook at all. More positive results were found in a 2007 experimental study, which

found that students who were exposed to an instructor’s highly disclosive Facebook profile anticipated a better classroom climate than students who saw a profile that was lower in self-disclosure, with similar results for other variables such as motivation.<sup>35</sup> Although positive open-ended comments by participants suggested that the self-disclosure encouraged students to find common ground with the instructor, negative comments betrayed a concern that the profile wasn’t “professional enough for a college-level professor.” The authors also caution that although the majority of the respondents reported positive perceptions of the Facebook profile, instructors should be cognizant that students might resent a lack of consistency between an instructor’s online self-presentation and classroom teaching style.

Unfortunately, little research is available that assesses the educational effectiveness of SNS tools. We need to conduct research that examines SNSs from an educational perspective and considers sound pedagogical principles in conjunction with assessments of the tools and the social practices that accompany their use. As Greenhow explains, “Most of the research that has been done on SNSs to date has been done outside the field of education and has tended to focus on network structures, friendship characteristics, and privacy issues. There is little that looks at their connection to learning and the educational benefits they may bring.”

## Conclusion

The classroom has changed much in the last 20 or 30 years. Norms concerning student-instructor interactions, campus codes of behavior, and instructional style have evolved in unexpected ways. Teaching and learning practices have evolved as well. Spurred in part by the changes encouraged by SNSs, learning activities that happen outside the classroom are acknowledged by many to be as important as what happens inside it. Three hours a

week is simply not enough time to influence the wide range of learning outcomes that institutions of higher learning want to affect—outcomes that transcend the acquisition of information and include ways of interacting with the world, exploring identity issues, and forming and maintaining social relationships with peers. As I've tried to outline above, SNSs may be able to support these processes in vitally important ways. As these services and our use of them evolve, the next few years promise to be a very exciting time for students and those of us who support their development inside and outside the classroom.

## Endnotes

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